

B) The Summer Catastrophe in Belarus: Oddities in the Greatest German Defeat of All Time.

Did the Soviet Union depend on the success of "Operation Bagration"?

In the summer of 1944, the Red Army wanted "Operation Bagration" to achieve a goal it had failed to achieve every time in previous months and years: the destruction of "Army Group Center." For this large-scale operation, the Soviets had mustered a third of their field strength. 2 331700 Red Army troops were waiting for their revenge for "Barbarossa."

Although the steady retreats of the post-Kursk era had hollowed out the German Ostheer, the formidable Red Army had by then failed to inflict the same catastrophic defeats on the Wehrmacht as it had itself endured under the blows of German troops in 1941-42.

Instead, the Wehrmacht was still deep in Soviet territory, far from the pre-war borders of the Soviet Union. From the front line, it was still much closer to Moscow than to Berlin!

Despite major gains in terrain, the Red Army had constantly taken terrible losses on the battlefield.

While it was possible to compensate somewhat for personnel losses by immediately drafting the male population of the recaptured areas, it was increasingly dependent on Western Allied aid to ensure the Red Army's technical mobility.

If, in the summer of 1944, Germany had succeeded in pinning down the Western Allies in their beachhead at Normandy or even driving them back to England, the Red Army would have had a major problem.

Stalin would then have quickly faced a reinforced German army with armored reserves transferred from the West to the Eastern Front – made worse by terrain well suited for defense.

The Russian planners then also calmly waited to launch their offensive until it became clear that the Normandy invasion by the Western Allies was not a failure. A lightning deployment of powerful German troops from west to east was no longer to be expected, Marshal Zhukov could start rolling.

A success of >Operation Bagration< was thus a necessity for the Red Army if it wanted to give a decisive turn to the war against Germany. Otherwise, a draw would have been in the cards again!

The Russian situation was also not made easier by the fact that the well-established secret intelligence channels from Switzerland were quite disturbed at that time.

Whether by chance or not, Stalin's planned summer offensive now received decisive backing from conspicuous blunders by high-ranking German officers.

"A quiet summer is to be expected..."

informed the chief of military intelligence in the East (FHO), General Gehlen, of "Heeresgruppe Mitte< just a few weeks before the major Soviet attack.

This conclusion is probably one of the most momentous "errors< of the entire war. The German High Command then also expected the main Soviet attack to come from the south, from the Ukraine.

If ever enemy reconnaissance played a decisive role during the Eastern campaign, it was in the early summer of 1944, immediately before the start of the major Soviet offensive. One of the lessons of the Eastern campaign so far was that an enemy breakthrough through the main battle line did not necessarily mean disaster. After all, it was a basic military rule to keep an operational reserve behind the front lines ready to respond. But in the summer of 1944, of all times, >Heeresgruppe Mitte< lacked such a reserve. It had been withdrawn to another army group – only shortly before the Russian attack.

In May 1944, the decision had been made in Moscow in favor of an attack on "Heeresgruppe Mitte<. Since the Soviets knew that the success of their operation depended on convincing the enemy that the focus of the attack was planned elsewhere, at first only five men knew of the entire plan of "Operation Bagration. These were Zhukov, Vasilevsky, Antonov, Shtemenko, and one of the deputy chiefs of the operational administration. Any contact between them by letter, telephone or telegraph was forbidden.

Reports from the front were handled only by two or three people who reported in person. Otherwise, no one learned more than he had to know because of his function. An exact date was not set until the final preparation phase. The deception was so extensive that in May the front commanders were ordered to switch to defense on the outside and give the impression that the Red Army was digging in to consolidate after nearly nine months of fighting. An absolute radio silence was also imposed. A fictitious army was >stationed< in the south of the Eastern Front, similar to the phantom army of the Western Allies in England. The transition to defense was clearly emphasized in the press and in the troops' political lessons.

In fact, however, the success of Soviet deceptive maneuvers depended not only on the skills of their planners but also on the willingness of the enemy to be hoodwinked.

In fact, what later became probably the most successful action of Soviet warfare did not go unnoticed at all. Nevertheless, the German side succeeded in recognizing the camouflaged deployment not only in essence, but in detail.

According to information from German enemy reconnaissance, an offensive plan was said to have been discussed under Stalin's chairmanship as early as between March 24 and March 30, 1944, under the slogan: "All roads lead to Rome, but the road to Berlin leads through Warsaw." This information from a "generally reliable source" of April 27 (German agent in Stalin's entourage?) was not heeded.

That a major Red Army summer operation would break out sooner or later had been almost an open secret among the German leadership since May 1944. Even Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda, who had been informed at second hand, was already expecting at that time an "enormous Soviet offensive, which will probably be synchronized with the invasion planned by the British and Americans."

The reconnaissance conducted by the troops in the great front arc of >Heeresgruppe Mitte<, especially in the course of May and June, suggested more and more clearly a Soviet troop buildup of the greatest magnitude. Clearly recognizable centers of gravity were formed around Vitebsk and Parichi. The Army Group and the Army High Command, however, did not believe the increasingly clear and complete results of troop reconnaissance (front-line and aerial observation, radio reconnaissance, interrogations of defectors and V-man intelligence).

Instead, more and more troops and heavy weapons were withdrawn from the central front and moved to the supposedly endangered area around Kovel.

In May, Hitler had nevertheless come to suspect that Stalin would now attack the >Heeresgruppe Mitte< with all his forces. The harbingers of the storm, which reached him from the front, bypassing the official channels, confirmed this suspicion.

But throughout the month of May, Gehlen's "Foreign Armies East" division had wanted to discover the main Soviet center of gravity further into the space in front of "Army Group North Ukraine<. Even when it was reported to Gehlen that Russian reinforcements were being moved from the Kovel area to the area of "Army Group Center<, the intelligence general would go no further on 13 June 1944 than to declare that the Red Army might launch an entrapment attack. Gehlen "forgot to mention the 6th Russian Guard Army in the Baltic Front area, which was later to play a major role in the push to Vitebsk.

Yet, on the ground, the 3rd, 4th, and 9th Armies in particular possessed complete and clear knowledge of the major event that was about to take place in their area.

The high command of the German 9th Army expressed itself dramatically and announced on June 17, 1944: "The situation in front of the army has changed fundamentally in a short time; with the enemy's force structure near the front remaining unchanged, a large-scale deployment is taking place in depth in

front of the entire army front." The first signs had already been recognized on June 3; the Soviet reinforcements brought in by June 15 were estimated at 10 to 15 divisions and two armored corps. It was determined that the center of gravity of the enemy offensive would undoubtedly be in the area of "Army Group Center."

The 4th Army also had a good overview. Thus, on 16 June, the Ic of the 4th Army reported the detection of 200 enemy batteries on the highway and 120 batteries in front of the 39th Panzer Corps. It was reported that the deployment of strong enemy forces in front of the center of the army had been completed since 20 June and that the offensive could now be expected to begin on 22 June. This is exactly how it should be!

The 9th Army learned on June 18 that Marshal Zhukov had visited the troops in the trench in front of its left wing. The Army recalled a London Radio report from early June that the Soviet objective would bring a surprise by deferring the Lemberg objective in favor of retaking Belarus. In fact, Marshal Zhukov mentioned in his memoirs that he had visited the assault armies and troops in the trenches in turn beginning on June 6. On June 19, in view of the enemy buildup, the 9th Army commander-in-chief demanded reinforcements beyond the Army Group Reserve (20th PZ.Div. and 707 Inf.Div.) to successfully fight the coming defensive battle. Nothing came of it! Then on 21 June it was reported to the top that the enemy was ready to attack in front of the 9th Army and that the attack could be expected to begin on 22 June. The direction of the main attack was also precisely indicated. As late as 20 June, in fact, the efficient French infantry regiment 638, deployed in the area of the German 4th Army, was transferred to France, although Army High Command 9 pointed out that the regiment had fully proved itself and would be difficult to dispense with.

Out of the role fell the 2nd Army (Chief of General Staff Henning von Tresckow). In contrast to the other armies, it took the view that an attack was to be expected in the near future at "Heeresgruppe Nordukraine<. This erroneous assessment of the situation was maintained by the 2nd Army even after the beginning of "Operation Bagration<. Further below it will have to be clarified whether only coincidence was at work here.

It is interesting to see how it was with the assessment of the Soviet airborne deployment. Before any offensive, it was an unmistakable feature when air forces were massed in the area of the expected sector of attack.

As early as the beginning of June 1944, a Russian U-2 biplane was shot down in the battle space of the Silesian 252nd Infantry Division. In it sat a firmly uninjured Soviet major from the staff of an air division. In his briefcase were found handwritten documents of the 3rd Air Army, from which far-reaching conclusions about the impending offensive could be drawn. The division commander, Lieutenant General Melzer, immediately passed the documents on to the 9th Corps. The major, a cipher officer, also testified that three Soviet fighter corps had arrived in the Smolensk area. More than 4500 Soviet aviators, nearly half of the Red Air Force's 11000 aircraft inventory, were now standing by in front of the area of "Army Group Center<.

Since, after all, the mass of the Soviet air force with 6900 airmen was still suspected by the intelligence service to be in the southern area, the air force did not want to give empty indications of suspected centers of attack.

What is clear is that of the "Army Groups Center< or "Northern Ukraine< that came into question for a coming Soviet attack, only "Army Group Center< possessed clear indications of an almost completed enemy deployment. Sufficient intelligence was available at least eight days before the start of the major Soviet offensive, and there would also have been time to react to the danger. Only the 20th Panzer Division, which at the time was considered to have little combat power, was transferred from the area of

"Army Group North Ukraine" to "Army Group Center" on 14 June 1944. This division alone would have brought "Bagration" into the greatest trouble by a hair's breadth.

Especially the troop concentrations in the flanks of the so-called "White Russian Arc" near Vitebsk and Bobruisk, the later main breakthrough sections of the Red Army, was flawlessly recognized. This incredibly clear picture of the situation, according to the former commanding general of the 4th Army, shows that the German reconnaissance services had done their job successfully: "It was a picture of the enemy of unusual clarity, which, in the diversity of observations, left no more room for the assumption that it could be a sham march or a misdirection." Nevertheless, it is an unbelievable process why the High Command of the "Army Group Center" downplayed the enlightened Russian threat.

This also gave backing to the forces representing an alleged "Northern Ukraine solution" in the OKH and to the Chief of Operations, General Heusinger, as well as to Chief of Staff General Zeitzler.

Even the deployment of the 240,000 Russian partisans, who on the night of June 20, 1944, largely paralyzed rail traffic between the Dnieper and the Berezina in the area of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" and cut off telephone traffic, was apparently not reported to the Führer's headquarters. In the war diary of the German Wehrmacht there is nothing recorded that even once such a message was passed on.

Heinz-Georg Lemm recalled that during his time in Russia he had rarely experienced that all signs pointed so clearly to an imminent attack. The mood in the officer corps had been a mixture of resignation and despair, because the reports from the front were apparently thrown to the wind by the higher command staffs. Even when the OKH had been supplied with indications that the 5th Guards Tank Army had been established ahead of "Heeresgruppe Mitte", the report "found no real credence," and the OKH under Zeitzler and Heusinger continued to accept all six Soviet tank armies in the southern section.

The question arises whether significant parts of the leadership of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" as well as the OKH (Army High Command) were unable - or unwilling - to recognize and react to the tremendous changes in front of the "Heeresgruppe Mitte" front.

The commander-in-chief of "Heeresgruppe Mitte", General der Feld-marschall Busch, was helpless in the face of this obvious misjudgment. "What am I to do?" Busch had asked his chief of staff, Lieutenant General Krebs, over and over again in his headquarters in Minsk, shrugging his shoulders. He was alluding to

his inability to overturn Zeitzler's and Heusinger's obviously wrong assessment of the situation.

On 22 June 1944, the "quiet summer" predicted by General Gehlen in the area of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" came to an abrupt end.

On a frontal section 700 km wide, 2.5 million Soviet soldiers stepped forward, fired 45,000 guns, rolled forward 6,100 tanks and assault guns, and about 4,500 planes attacked "Heeresgruppe Mitte", which had been abandoned by the OKH and parts of the Army Group leadership. In fact, at the beginning of "Operation Bagration", the Soviets were unable to achieve tactical surprise at any single point. After all, the main points of attack had been correctly foreseen by the armies' I Corps divisions. Now, too, it would have been a matter of moving the available tanks and artillery reserves as well as air units to the threatened section of the front as quickly as possible.

Supported by false downplaying statements of leading officers of the 2nd and 4th Army, the OKH under Zeitzler and Heusinger as well as the Abteilung "Fremde Heere Ost" continued to insist on their erroneous assessment of the situation even several days after the beginning of the Soviet offensive. The largest Soviet offensive of the Second World War was described only as a "sham attack."

Even the war diary of the "Heeresgruppe Mitte\*" did not show any serious concerns about the course of the defensive operation of the Army Group as late as June 22.

Already one day later the front of "Heeresgruppe Mitte\*" northwest and southwest of Vitebsk was torn apart. When then General Field Marshal Busch let the Army High Command know at 2:45 p.m. that the situation with the 3rd Panzer Army could no longer be restored by its own forces, the unbelievable question of the Chief of the Operations Department of the OKH, General Heusinger, followed, to which reasons this development was due. Did he really not know better, or were there other motives behind it?

The opportunity to act would have arisen as late as 24 June 1944. In fact, on June 24, the 3rd, 9th, and 4th Armies of "Heeresgruppe Mitte\*" were still far from a complete defeat, as it was soon to occur. On that day, >Heeresgruppe Mitte< considered it possible that the enemy was mainly attacking its three eastern armies, because >Heeresgruppe Nordukraine\* was still quiet. On the other hand, according to the opinion of the >Heeresgruppe Mitte\*, nine tenths of the enemy's armored units were in the south. Even now, the high command of "Army Group Center" as well as the OKH were not prepared to act decisively in order to save the soldiers of "Army Group Center" who were in the greatest danger. Not even from the non-attacked 2nd Army of "Heeresgruppe Mitte\*" reinforcements were thrown to the other endangered sectors of the Army Group.

Full of despair in view of the impending unnecessary doom, the 9th Army had the following entered in its war diary on June 25, 1944: "The AOK (Army High Command 9) can accept all these orders, of whose disastrous consequences it is fully aware, only with that obedience with which the troop leader, after responsibly presenting his opposing view, has to carry out the orders of his superiors, even if they contradict his conviction."

Four days later, the 9th Army had gone down as a major force.

The puzzling withdrawal of the armored reserves.

On 29 May 1944, the OKH ordered the transfer of the LVI Panzer Corps from "Heeresgruppe Mitte\*" to "Heeresgruppe Nordukraine\*". Even a letter of protest from "Heeresgruppe Mitte\*" on the same day to General Heusinger, Chief of the General Staff of the OKH, did not bring about any change.

Heusinger had his reasons, as we will see later!

Thus, "Heeresgruppe Mitte\*" lost 88 percent of its tanks, 23 percent of its assault guns and 50 percent of its "Rhinos\*" (tank destroyers with 8.8 cm PAK).

When the Soviet attack began on 22 June 1944, "Heeresgruppe Mitte\*" had only one heavy tank battalion, the heavy tank battalion 501 with "Tigers\*.

The OKH had not shied away from sending four heavy "Tiger tank battalions at once, battalions 505, 506, 507 and 509 to "Army Group North Ukraine\*. In early June, the heavy tank battalion 501 even had to give up nine of its >Tigers< to the tank battalion 509 at >Heeresgruppe Nordukraine\*. This left Panzer Battalion 501 with only 20 >Tigers<.1

The disastrous withdrawal of tank reserves from >Heeresgruppe Mitte\* only a few weeks before the start of the major Russian attack deprived this army group of any possibility of shifting its center of gravity in the event of an attack.

Today, however, >modern< historians like to claim that even without the withdrawal of the panzer reserves, a Russian victory in the area of >Heeresgruppe Mitte\* was inevitable.

The effective use of the 20th Panzer Division as the sole Army Group reserve, as well as the devastation wrought among the Russian attackers by the combat vehicles of the 5th Panzer Division, which arrived long after the major Russian offensive had begun, speak otherwise.2

The successes achieved by the heavy tank battalion 501 with only 20 "Tigers\* in the Orsha area, as well as the firing figures of the heavy tank battalions 505 and 507, which were transferred to the Army Group much too late after all, are also more than revealing: all three units lost a relatively small number of "Tigers\*, mostly because they could not be recovered. All three "Tiger\* battalions were thereby

temporarily and locally successful in bringing the Soviet advance to a halt. Even "Sta-lin\* tanks and SU-152 assault guns (with 15.2 cm cannons) could not get past the "Tigers\* lying like rocks in the surf. The heavy tank battalions 505 and 507 eventually retreated only to avoid imminent encirclement after their rearward links were cut off or threatened. Even in the desperate days of the Soviet breakthrough, the "Tigers\* were still able to achieve a kill ratio of 6.1:1 against incredible overwhelming odds. Thus it is clear that the responsible gentlemen in the OKH, especially General Heusinger, did the Red Army a great service by withdrawing the tank reserves of "Heeresgruppe Mitte\* shortly before the start of the major offensive.

False reports, lies and leadership chaos at "Heeresgruppe Mitte<

Despite all advance warnings, the war diary of "Heeresgruppe Mitte< recorded the following message on 22 June 1944: "The major attack northwest of Vitebsk means a complete surprise for the German leadership, since according to the previous enemy picture, such a strong massing (6-7 divisions) was not assumed here."

Although the Army Group had reported the start of the Russian offensive to the OKH (Army High Command) at 8:15 a.m. that same day, the war diary that same day recorded no evidence of more serious concern about the conduct of the Army Group's defensive operation.<sup>1,2</sup>

Today, the German leadership is widely accused of having been partly to blame for the demise of "Heeresgruppe Mitte< through its late actions and orders.

The main blame for the dilemma, however, is probably to be found among high officers of "Heeresgruppe Mitte" itself. For example, on the evening of June 24, the Chief of the General Staff of the 4th Army, General Schulze-Büttger, reported that the Russian lacked momentum. According to overheard radio messages, the latter was amazed at the strong German defenses. He had become bogged down in the area of the 337th Infantry Division and was leading forces from Tschaussy to the north. This, he said, was a sign that he urgently needed forces in the breach at the 337th Infantry Division. This downplaying of Schulze-Büttger took place on June 24, 1944, which became the fateful day of "Heeresgruppe Mitte<. On this day it would still have been possible to avert the catastrophe and to withdraw in time the front-line units threatened with encirclement and annihilation.

Instead of decisive reports and orders, however, chaos, lies and trickery prevailed at the Army Group. A statement in the 4th Army's June 25 war diary shows what this was all about: "Caution required in upward conversations." On the same day, "Army Group Center" and the armies attempted to weaken the front arc southeastward of Bobruisk to the point that the formations there would be deliberately pushed back soon. An unbelievable operation.

Strangely enough, the war diary of the "Heeresgruppe